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ABSTRACT

Before students will pursue nontraditional careers, they must be convinced that there are good reasons to break into vocational fields previously identified as the domains of the opposite sex. The failure of girls to become involved in traditionally male vocational education courses may indicate that the courses are no longer relevant and are only attended by boys for social or other reasons not related to practical concerns. Schools that consciously try not to discourage enrollment in nontraditional courses may still fail to encourage such enrollment sufficiently. Teachers may also discourage enrollment by treating male and female students differently. School boards are responsible for promoting sex equity and must go beyond the mere meeting of minimum standards. Among the strategies that can be used are communicating equity needs to school personnel and the community at large, reviewing teaching materials for nonvocational classes that may reflect sex-biased attitudes toward vocational choice, hiring women or men to teach courses traditionally taken by the other sex, appointing a citizens' advisory committee, obtaining grants, and perhaps holding an annual "nontraditional job fair." Progress toward equity should be measured by monitoring enrollments and student attitudes. (PGD)

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Volume 17/Number 4/April 1986

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"I can't figure it out. We require industrial arts and home economics for both girls and boys in the junior high, all our courses are open to girls, we rewrote the handbook . . . but they're just not interested."

Those were the conclusive remarks of a high school guidance counselor frustrated by the nagging evidence that sex equity still eludes vocational education programs. Can it be that inequities persist almost ten years after implementation of the Vocational Education Amendments of 1976 with its goals of eliminating sex discrimination and stereotyping in vocational education programs?

Clearly, school systems, if not by conscience then by law, have addressed inequities in vocational education and other school programs. The 1970s brought a new awareness of nontraditional enrollments and the recognition of sexist course descriptions and gender-based policies. School systems quickly responded to new statutes; handbooks, course catalogues, and school board policies generally were brought into compliance.

Nevertheless, subtle discrimination persists in vocational education programs. What are these subtle sex discrimination practices in vocational education and how can school systems improve their records?

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Relevant content

Lack of meaningful curriculums is central to the issue of vocational education sex equity. When girls don't enroll in Woods I or Metals II, it may be for the simple reason that the skills learned in those classes are irrelevant in today's occupational world. In contrast, boys continue to take these classes because they are socially acceptable and offer a comfortable setting for a "hands on" experience.

For girls or boys to break into a nontraditional field, they must be convinced that there is a good reason to do so, such as a job at the end of the line. Robotization and mechanization in the workplace complicated by the social influence that these are "boys' jobs" guarantee that few girls will approach the Industrial Arts or Trade and Industry classroom doors.

This doesn't mean that there ought to be a duality in vocational curriculum development. On the contrary, the lack of interest in some vocational education programs may indicate the need to take a hard look at curricular content to examine its relevance for boys *and* girls. The result will be a strengthening of the program for both.

In redesigning the content of your programs or courses, tailor them to the needs of your own school system, student population, and community. Three general road signs for directing your effort are:

- *Relevant content*—a relationship between content and the realities of the occupational world;
- *Dynamic content*—flexibility that permits readjustment to changes in vocational education goals and objectives;
- *Broad-based content*—preparation for the current workplace and for the uncertainty of the future world of work; include the teaching of critical thinking skills and personal skills that will give students the confidence and ability to face the challenge of new problems, make responsible decisions, and search for creative solutions to new dilemmas.

Role of guidance departments

Another area to examine is how students are made aware of available opportunities. Covert practices of sex discrimination may exist in your guidance departments.

A high school counselor recently explained: "Sure, all our courses are open to girls. However, I tell them . . . you'll probably be the only girl in Principles of Technology, but if that's your choice, it's okay."

This subtle suggestion that the student's choice of a nontraditional class is an inappropriate decision can be a powerful tool in ensuring the status quo. As explained in *Education for Tomorrow's Jobs* (National Academy Press, 1983), ". . . parents, teachers, counselors tend to prepare students for worlds according to what they know. This is not an ominous conspiracy. There is no hidden motive. It is simply a fact."

Because this is a fact, encouragement, inducement, and excitement for girls in such careers as engineering, carpentry, and electronics, or interest in clerical and health services by boys, does not

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occur. It is not that the students are discouraged; it is by not encouraging boys and girls to explore nontraditional occupations that we produce the same results.

Changing course titles, rewriting course descriptions, and replacing guidance brochures clearly isn't enough. Guidance departments encouraged by school boards and in conjunction with administrative and teaching staffs should use a variety of strategies to provide information and encouragement to parents, students, and teachers in order that students may begin to mentally "try on" nontraditional work.

Teacher role

Attention also should be paid to what goes on in the classroom once students are enrolled in nontraditional courses. You should find out if girls are being treated differently from boys in classes that have been traditionally male oriented.

For example, a male Trade and Industry teacher sends a message of discouragement—or even hostility—when he says to a female student, "You do that very well for a girl." A negative message also is conveyed when the teacher performs tasks for a girl that he lets boys do for themselves.

In addition, try to find out if the girls and boys who enroll in traditionally sex stereotyped courses are considered oddballs—if they are being harassed by students or teachers. The records on midyear course changes may offer clues. Are girls dropping out of traditionally male courses? Are boys not sticking with the traditionally female courses? How often does this happen? Are some courses affected more than others? What are the students' reasons for changing classes?

Also find out if some teachers are more successful than others at retaining boys and girls in their nontraditional classes? Clearly, teachers have a strong influence over classroom atmosphere. Teachers need to be aware that their behavior, language, and attitudes may be sexist, consciously or unconsciously. Objective teacher evaluation and inservice programs designed to alert teachers to their natural tendencies and provide help in overcoming them are critical.

School board responsibility

School boards may be content with their expedient responses to Title IX and vocational education laws. But they may be overlooking their ongoing responsibility for promoting sex equity in vocational education.

A school board member proudly explained recently that his board had carefully examined its policies from a nonsexist vantage point and rewritten the course catalogue and student handbook to assure bias-free language. "We've done it all!" he concluded.

Congratulations. But there's a good deal more to do. Because the subtle effects of sex discrimination are especially and measurably evident in vocational education, it is essential that additional steps be taken.

School board leadership

School board members can provide discerning leadership, individually and collectively, by continuing to question the school system's record on equity and establishing a climate in which to plan for improvement. Some pertinent questions to consider are:

- Does your school system follow a plan specifically designed to address sex equity in vocational education?
- When did your administration last provide you with gender-specific data for vocational education courses?
- When was the last time teachers, counselors, and administrators were inserviced on equity issues?
- Does your school system employ nontraditional role models as vocational education teachers?
- What is known about the employment of male and female students who don't go on to higher education after graduation from your schools?

Use the answers to these and other questions to plan your strategies for strengthening your vocational education programs and providing all students with a positive view of the dynamic world of work.

Strategies

There are several practical ways to address sex equity in vocational education programs. Of primary importance, staff must be aware of your goals and understand how they can assist in achieving them. Inservice programs specifically directed at equity issues should be designed for counselors, vocational education staff, and administrative staff.

Also look beyond the parameters of vocational education for sex stereotyping messages that may be influencing student attitudes. A mathematics textbook that poses questions in a sexist manner ("Johnny drove a truck 20 miles . . . Mary baked one dozen cookies . . .") instills or cements attitudes of sex bias in young minds.

In the same manner, nontraditional role models can influence student—and staff—attitudes. Consider how girls' interest in auto mechanics, for example, might be sparked if it was taught by a woman. Make an effort to recruit women and men to teach traditionally male and female subjects. At least make an effort to identify people in your community who hold nontraditional jobs; invite them to participate in classes and serve as role models.

Building on that bridge to the community, another useful strategy is to appoint a citizens advisory committee composed of business and industry representatives, including people with nontraditional careers. This committee can serve as a "think tank" for designing strategies to improve your system's record on sex equity. The bonus: While your school system profits from local citizens' ideas and efforts, you also will be establishing a partnership with business and industry that will pay dividends to your vocational education program—and other programs—in the future.

You also should explore the possibility of obtaining a sex equity grant for

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your school system. The Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act (P.L. 98-524), which was signed into law in 1984, mandates "set aside monies" to fund programs and activities that eliminate sex bias in vocational education programs. Check with your state education department for guidelines. You may be eligible for funds that could be used to develop curricular materials, strategies to improve nontraditional enrollment data, or to support overdue sex equity inservice for guidance counselors. In addition, most states have a sex equity coordinator for vocational education in their state departments of education to assist local school systems with sex equity programs.

Promote awareness

Removing barriers to sex equity isn't a job for the schools alone. Discriminatory practices have evolved over time in society and awareness of changing views and values must extend beyond the schoolhouse. Parents especially need to learn about how employment opportunities for men and women are expanding and changing; parental expectations are a strong influence on a child's career planning. Local school systems may have to play a leadership role in enhancing parental awareness of nontraditional career opportunities; parents aren't going to do the research themselves.

To promote sex equity awareness in your community, you should consider devising an informational plan for your school system and community that provides nontraditional occupation data. For instance, look for examples of nontraditional occupation practices in your community to highlight in a brochure. Make this brochure available in guidance offices, media centers, community libraries, and other local institutions and community centers.

In addition, you could develop a slide presentation that focuses on the dynamics of the workplace and the diverse opportunities for men and women. Use this presentation with parent/student counseling groups, appropriate courses, registration programs, community service organizations, and youth organizations. You even may be able to interest one or more local companies that are making strides toward eliminating sex discrimination and stereotyping in their hiring policies to pay for the slide show and brochure.

Another idea is to hold an annual "nontraditional job fair" before the course registration deadline each year. Get everyone involved, including members of the citizens advisory committee; the committee could be asked to sponsor the fair. Community interest and involvement should increase as the local business and industry community provides information and role models for this event.

Monitor your success

As with any new effort, your strategies for dismantling sex barriers in vocational education should be monitored and evaluated to determine their success. You may want to survey student attitudes toward nontraditional occupations before you begin and after strategies would be expected to have an effect. Also monitor course enrollments by gender, and how post-high school career and educational plans of male and female students change over time.

Finally, take time to enjoy your satisfaction at providing unlimited educational possibilites through which all students can explore their limitless potential in the world of work. ■

Role models are key

Providing nontraditional role models for students can be an effective way to break down existing sex barriers to vocational education. But finding the nontraditional role models—a male home economics teacher, for example, or a female industrial arts teacher—probably won't be easy.

A program at Keene State College (New Hampshire) is addressing the issue. Six years ago, with federal vocational education funds, the college began a program to train women to be industrial arts teachers.

No great revolution is occurring, however. Only one woman who graduated from the program currently is teaching industrial arts in New Hampshire; another has left teaching already for a related position in the private sector; two women will graduate in May. "The future holds promise," says Del Ogg, project director. "Nine women are enrolled in the program now."

For more information on the Keene program, contact: Del Ogg, Chairman, Industrial Education and Technology Department, Keene State College, Keene, N.H. 03431.

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rotation plans point to the benefits of long-term affiliation with a school. Schools are dynamic enterprises: children's needs change; teachers come and go; instructional goals and strategies are revised. A principal with a clear educational philosophy can lead a school through change and continue to develop professionally because of change.

Moreover, a principal new to a school invests considerable time in identifying the school's strengths and weaknesses and developing a teamwork approach with staff and community. Principals who are rotated too frequently may never have the time to fulfill their plans once they get everyone working as a team. Through a long-term commitment, a principal can demonstrate leadership skills—a key component of the research on effective schools.

In developing a principal rotation policy, decide what you hope to achieve through the practice and then consider both the pros and the cons in light of that goal. Review your own school system's data to determine if principal rotation is the right method for achieving your goal.

For example, find out how frequently principals transfer voluntarily and why. Perhaps they inherently recognize that change can be beneficial. Also find out how long principals generally remain in the same position. Do long-term principals continue to do a good job?

Also find out if principal rotation has been successful in other school systems and what process works best. In addition, determine whether any restrictions on a principal rotation policy are contained in contractual agreements or state law; consult with your legal counsel.

This information may help in determining the length of time a principal should stay with the same school and when transfer may be appropriate. It also may point out that principal rotation isn't the way to achieve your goal.

If the concept still seems right, discuss it with your principals. They will have concerns and suggestions. Involve them in developing the policy and procedures. In addition to the importance of including those who will be affected by policy in its development, having the principals on your side will make it easier to gain parental support. Principals can help convince parents that principal rotation will result in improvement rather than instability. ■